

University of Groningen

Ethnomusicology and the Refusal of Mastery

Tonelli, Christopher

Published in:
Sound Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/20551940.2016.1245996](https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2016.1245996)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Tonelli, C. (2016). Ethnomusicology and the Refusal of Mastery: Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation, by David Novak. *Sound Studies*, 2(1), 89-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2016.1245996>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

**Ethnomusicology and the Refusal of Mastery: A Review of David Novak's
*Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation***

***Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*, by David Novak. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, 292 pages. ISBN 978-0-8223-5392-8. £16.99**

If sound studies is centrally concerned with the materiality of sound, most of what David Novak offers here falls outside the field. The bulk of *Japanoise*, an ethnomusicological study of Noise, a musical genre that first gained visibility under that moniker in the early 1980s, involves examinations of transnational exchange, theorizations of semiotic affordances, and ethnographic descriptions of performances that often deal more with visual than sonic detail. Though Novak addresses his resistance to offering an overarching history of Noise music—capital N Noise distinguishes the genre from the general concept of noise—he leaves readers without an equivalent justification of why he didn't make the sounds of this music a more central focus of the book. However, this disciplinarily-specific complaint should not overshadow the importance of this book. Emerging from a decade of fieldwork and deep multifaceted involvement in Noise cultures in Japan, Canada, and the United States, *Japanoise* makes a valuable and authoritative contribution to the meager literature on Noise as well as to Japanese studies, transnational music studies, material culture studies, and ethnomusicology.¹ And, though most of *Japanoise* may not qualify as sound studies, sound studies concerns come to the fore at several points.

The chapter of greatest import to sound studies opens *Japanoise*. Here, Novak expands on previous efforts theorizing how private listening to recorded music and public experiences of live performance blur in co-constitutive recursive cycles.² Noise is associated with harsh electronic sounds and extreme loudness and an informant's account of how this loudness "sucks all the air out of the room" leads Novak to theorize how sensations associated with private audition emerge in the space of the livehouse.³ We also read about how Noise producers invoke the loudnesses of Noise livehouses on recordings that listeners might opt to play back at lower volumes. Novak frames these sonic details with a discussion of the theoretical concepts of "liveness" and "deadness." For sound engineers, the terminology *live* and *dead* refer to the presence (live) or absence (dead) of reverberation and echo. Theoretical constructs of liveness and deadness cannot be divorced from sound engineering uses of live and dead, but they extend into considerations that do not map back onto the material binary engineers underscore: The theoretical apparatus of deadness, as developed by Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut in their article "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," is meant to invoke the inescapable imbrication of sound and fleshy bodies and of labor from both the past and

¹ Paul Hegarty's *Noise/Music* and Greg Hainge's *Noise Matters* include sections that deal with the Noise music genre. Full-length works on the genre include Adam Simon Potts' 2014 doctoral dissertation *From Active to Passive Noise: Rethinking the Radicalism of Japanese Noise Music* and the volume *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise*.

² Notable previous efforts include Gracyk (1996), Auslander (1999), and Stanyek and Piekut (2010).

³ Here Novak is quoting an unidentified consultant; Novak, *Japanoise*, 46.

the present. Both live and dead sound contribute to deadness in their figuration. Conversely, Novak's deadness is dead deadness; he is concerned with theorizing these same imbrications as afforded by dead sounds and provides new examples of deadness in action. Since dead sound is associated both with the baffled spaces of recording studios and the non-spaces of digital storage media, live Noise performances composed of dead sound that overwhelms the liveness of the performance space and that approximates the physicality of listening through headphones produce Stanyek and Piekut's deadness in unique ways in and through sonic deadness. Given these material concerns, Novak's theorization of the affordances and utility of dead sounds in the listening practices of Noise cultures makes a notable contribution to sound studies by expanding the literature on deadness.

There are other sound studies moments peppered throughout the book. Chapter seven discusses the different intimacies afforded by digital and physical distribution and how Noisicians have sustained their use of cassettes despite that medium's disappearance from the commercial mainstream. Sound studies moments appear in brief mentions of the ways the sounds of cassettes—their emphasis of midrange frequencies, tape hiss, wow-and-flutter, and the sounds of degradation through generations of tape copying—"eventually became aesthetic markers of the "classic" Noise recordings of the 1980s."⁴ These sound-oriented sections arrive and disappear quickly though as Novak's purpose in the chapter is not to detail these sounds, but to provide an overview of cassette-related practices, to contrast tape exchange networks with Noise cultures online, and to explore the shifting meanings of cassettes as they moved from being a dominant to a minor technology.

Chapters five and six both emerge from reflections on the chains of effects pedals and other equipment Noisicians use. Rather than detailed descriptions of these setups or the sounds they produce, considerations of the cultural values that create and are created by these technologies dominate. We learn that most Noisicians aren't seeking mastery of technology; they set up systems that produce feedback loops which they cannot perfectly control, but which they have a hand in shaping. This leads to the book's central theoretical notion, the observation that, like feedback, culture is composed of cycles shaped by actors during processes of recursive circulation. Novak contrasts the refusal of mastery, the general ethic that Noise is not the artist's sound, but a cycle of sound they are a part of, with the controlled use of feedback in art music.⁵ The semiotic value of this refusal of mastery is positioned in chapter five as an exemplar of non-hierarchical dialogic exchange between elements in a system of circulation. In chapter six, however, Noise's semiotic potential is differently positioned as an exemplar of our ability to intervene in destructive technocultural processes.

Chapter six may be of particular interest to scholars of Japanese studies as it contextualizes the rise of Noise within the characterization of Japan as technoculturally exceptional. Novak argues that anxieties in Japan around the negative effects of this exceptionality led Noise to gain a period of attention in the mainstream media. He

⁴ *ibid.*, 208.

⁵ John Cage, David Tudor, Terry Riley, David Behrman, Max Neuhaus, Steve Reich, and Robert Ashley are the composers and technologists mentioned in this section.

underscores the awkwardness of this encounter by contrasting the use of outmoded and modified technology in Noise with the electronic sounds of other forms of popular music. While other sounds may signify the capitalist imperative to adopt the most recent technological innovations, Novak argues the sounds of Noise have been more likely to signify the embrace of that which capitalism has discarded; as a result of this dissonance, Noise's appearance in the Japanese media mainstream was uncomfortable and short-lived.

Japanese studies is also emphasized in chapters two to four, but here the focus is on transnational exchange. In chapter two, Novak traces the circulation of recordings and the ways inaccurate cross-cultural imaginations catalyze cross-cultural activity and musical practice. Ethnomusicologists may find this chapter particularly compelling as it opens with Novak beginning his fieldwork in Japan, trying to get beyond the recordings that had familiarized him with Noise by discovering and mapping the "real" scene—venues and social networks—only to find that his consultants directed him not to particular spaces and relationships but back to recordings. He came to understand that Noise was nomadic and his research site could hardly be localized, except for through the record stores that housed the recordings whose complex paths of circulation themselves "defined the local landscape of Noise."⁶ Chapter three focuses on Drugstore, a short-lived space in Kyoto where individuals gathered to listen to recordings in and beyond genres like free improvisation, electronic music, and progressive rock. Novak describes how listening practices there were not limited to simple playback, but included "listening in which recordings were looped, played at different speeds, and sometimes mixed together in a sonic collage."⁷ This "experimental listening" to "experimental music" was generative of the practices that yielded Noise. Those reading *Japanoise* for a history will be most satisfied by the descriptions of these processes. Chapter four contrasts two quite different archetypes, the Nihilist Spasm Band, a stalwart group of Canadian improvisers formed in 1965, and Merzbow, a prolific, politicized Noise celebrity. As in the previous chapters, cycles of transnational exchange are detailed. As Japanese listeners discovered the Canadians, cross-cultural contact became a catalyst, transforming the practices of the NSB and narratives of the history of Noise. Conversely, in Merzbow's cross-cultural exchanges, he was expected to "characterize his work in relation to Japanese sociocultural differences."⁸ This chapter begins by challenging monolithic historicizations and ends by illustrating the seemingly intractable hierarchies in transnational flows between North America and Japan.

After finishing *Japanoise*, I felt unsatisfied, like I had only been offered a partial treatment of the topics at hand. Chapters often felt brief and fragmented, made up of sections that are related but divergent and underdeveloped. On second thought, this disappointment faded. Though I wanted certain sections to be developed further, histories to be more revealing, and the presence of sounds to be more available through the prose, I came to consider my disappointment productive and feel that Novak shouldn't be faulted for reminding us knowledge is always partial or for employing Noise's refusal of mastery.

⁶ *ibid.*, 66.

⁷ *ibid.*, 105.

⁸ *ibid.*, 133.

Discussions of Noise music are of special relevance to sound studies simply because listeners have experienced it as a space between music and non-music. As such, sound studies scholars interested in what it means for sounds to be experienced as music are well-served by knowledge of the practices, discourses, and contexts of Noise. While Novak offers us an introduction to these practices, discourses, and contexts, his commendable book also invites us to go further, to immerse ourselves into the currents and cycles that circulate this (non-)music.

Works Cited

Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Gracyk, Theodore. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Hegarty, Paul. *Noise/Music: A History*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Hainge, Greg. *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Potts, Adam Simon. "From Active to Passive Noise: Rethinking the Radicalism of Japanese Noise Music." PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2014.

Stanyek, Jason, and Benjamin Piekut. "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane." *TDR: The Drama Review*. 54, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 14-38.

Woodward, Brett, ed. *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise*. Melbourne: Extreme, 1999.